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LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH FOR CHILDREN WITH NON-STANDARD DIALECTS.

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THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH TO READING FOR CHILDREN WITH DIALECTAL PROBLEMS IS PRESENTED AS A TOTAL APPORACH TO READING RATHER THAN AS A METHOD. THE CHILD IS ENCOURAGED TO EXPRESS HIS THOUGHTS ABOUT HIS ENVIRONMENT. THESE THOUGHTS AND EXPRESSIONS ARE RECORDED AND PERHAPS ILLUSTRATED AND THEN READ BY THE CHILD. AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, THE CHILD'S OWN WORDS ARE RECORDED FOR HIM, AND ONLY GROSSEST ERRORS ARE CHANGED TO COMPLY WITH GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURING. PHONEME-GRAPHEME CORRESPONDENCE ACROSS DIALECTAL LINES SHOULD BE TAUGHT CAUTIOUSLY. SPELLING ACROSS DIALECTS SHOULD BE UNIFORM. TEACHERS SHOULD ALLOW THE CHILD TO READ IN HIS DIALECT AND SHOULD REMEMBER THAT SPELLING MAY NOT DETERMINE PRONUNCIATION. IT IS RECOMMENDED THAT (1) THE LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH BE USED WITH CHILDREN AS EARLY AS POSSIBLE, (2) SPEECH, VOCABULARY, AND CONCEPTS BE DEVELOPED CONTINUOUSLY, (3) SKILLS BE TAUGHT SYSTEMATICALLY, (4) AUDIOVISUAL INSTRUCTION BE USED WITH THE APPROACH, (5) QUESTIONS PROMOTE THINKING AND THE USE OF LANGUAGE, AND (6) THE BEST TEACHERS BE EMPLOYED. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH CONFERENCE (HONOLULU, NOVEMBER 23-25, 1967). (JM)

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LANGUAGE EXPERIENCE APPROACH FOR CHILDREN WITH NON-STANDARD DIALECTS

by Lawrence M. Kasdon

The Language Experience Approach is not a new method of teaching the language arts. As far as I know, it started in the 1890's when Miss Flora J. Cooke began experimenting with a "natural" method of teaching beginners to read by recording on the blackboard the children's oral expressions related to their current experiences. "Reading, writing and drawing," she said, "are learned in the service of what the children are doing as a social community."[1]

Although the Language Experience Approach is thought by many as a method of teaching reading, it is truly a total approach to developing skills in all the language arts. Fundamental to the language experience approach is the promise that it is based on the child's experience and current interests. The language he uses is the basis for language learning. From the beginning, each child is encouraged to share his ideas by means of pictures and words. The teacher records the child's stories on his pictures and he then reads his story to his classmates. Stories may also be developed from an experience of a group of children

[1] Flora J. Cooke, "Reading in the Primary Grades," THE COURSE OF STUDY. Publications of the Chicago Institute), 1 (1900) 111-115; as quoted in Gertrude H.Hildreth, "Experience-Related Reading for School Beginners," ELEMENTARY ENGLISH, XXXII (March,1965), 280-297.

[redacted]

It is interesting to note that Miss Cooke observed that by this approach, reading and writing used simultaneously, reinforced and supplemented each other. Recently, the rationals of a developing pattern of language experiences has been stated this way: "what he (the child) thinks about he can say; what he says can be written (or dictated); what has been written can be read; and he can read what he has written and what others have written for him to read."[2] However, this does not mean that books should be removed from the classroom until he can read for himself. On the contrary, since this is a total language arts program, books must be made available to the children when he first enters school. He must have books to explore as well as to have stories and poetry read to him.

In this paper we shall concern ourselves with the dialects of the child from the lower socio-economic strata since these are the children, for the most part, who have difficulty in learning the modes of language and developing the cognition styles necessary for success in school. I fully agree with Goodman[3] that "the dialects of urban divergent speakers are much more varied and shade from distinct divergent dialects to standard speech." In his article, Goodman offers as one of his hypotheses that "The more divergence there is between the dialect of the learner and the dialect of learning, the more difficult will be the task of learning to read."This hypothesis is tenable to the extent that the language of the learner differs from the language of the reading materials or of the teacher. However, in the language experience approach, the child is encouraged to express

2 Roadh Van Allen and Claryce Allen, LANGUAGE EXPERIENCES IN READING: TEACHER'S RESOURCE BOOK. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Press, 1966, p.6.

3 Kenneth S. Goodman, "Dialect Barriers to Reading Comprehension," ELEMENTARY ENGLISH, XLII (December, 1965), 853-860.

s thought about things in his environment. This self-expression
y be in the form of speaking in many class situations, the use
art media to which words may be added; writing -- first by
ctating to someone else, reading printed symbols in the environment,
ile developing an awareness of the recurring pattern of speech
unds and symbols. What the Language Experience Approach emphasizes
that the beginning stages of reading and writing occur when he
lks about his own art work and sees his <u>own</u> words take form in print
fore his very eyes.

Consequently, there need not be a gap between the child's
nguage and thought and what appears on the page. From the beginning
is introduced to the interrelationships that exist between his thoughts
d the various forms of language. The divergent speaker is no longer
der a handicap until he can master the language used in the school,
t has the satisfaction of achieving immediate success. With such
ceptance the process of accultration to the school is painless and
sitive. Of course, the child will be learning to master the dialects
the school from the great amount of interaction that this program
rovides between teacher and pupil. I would like to add that it is
ot necessary for the teacher to speak in the child's dialect. The
hild has already been exposed to the so-called standard dialect by
eans of radio and television,[4] and has some command of it. These mass
edia will already have given him some start toward the mastery of the

4 Raven I. McDavid, Jr., points out that "It is an ironic act that the most culturally deprived groups actually make the greatest use of the entertainment medium that provides the greatest opportunities for developing these associations (between language and its graphic representation) -- television." Raven I. McDavid, Jr., Dialestology and the Teaching of Reading," THE READING TEACHER, VIII (December,1964), 207.

spoken dialect of the schools and the literary dialects of books. To be sure, Captain Kangaroo and Superman supply meager literary background, but they are a start and make obvious the necessity of the school's supplying the divergent speaker with the best literary fare that he is capable of dealing with. This will mean that the literature program must be individualized in terms of the tastes and literary capabilities of the child. With the large amount of money available for the disadvantaged no difficulty should exist in having several tape recorders, record players, earphones, sound filmstrips, movies, books, and magazines for the classroom. All of these media can be used to help the child in his acquisition of the spoken dialect of the school and the literary dialects.

More important than any materials is the teacher herself. In the beginning she accepts the child's language while serving as a good model herself of another dialect. Because she accepts the child with his language, the child in turn will be more likely to accept the teacher and her strange language. At the same time, the teacher will be offering the child excellent guidance in the acquisition of the spoken and literary dialects of the school. At this stage of the child's development I would recommend that the artificial language of the reading textbook <u>not</u> be introduced, since he will be learning to read through his own stories. Furthermore, reading and writing programs which attempt to teach phoneme-grapheme correspondence cannot be universally applied across all dialects, since the divergent speaker may not hear the sounds of standard speech in his dialect because he does not have them or because they occur in different places in his dialect. To illustrate this point, the publishers of i/t/a materials found that it would be prudent to publish American editions of the original material produced in England, since the standard British dialect of English does differ from the American dialect. Furthermore, many of the programs which emphasize phoneme-grapheme correspondence have to make the assumption that there is a single dialect spoken

throughout the United States that can be transcribed with a single written alphabet.[5]

In response to his own rhetorical question, "How does the dialectal situation affect the teacher of reading?", Raven McDavid writes: "This dialectal situation means that the teacher must accept a multi-valued conception of standard English with a consequent variety of phonemic-graphemic associations." The saving grace in this multi-dialectical situation is the uniformity of spelling across dialects. No matter how words are spoken throughout the country they are usually spelled the same. Even though the child may say dis ting, it is written this thing; and something is written the same, whether we say sǝmpthin or sǝmpm. This standardization of spelling for a multidialectical speech offer us two clues to teaching: (1) part of the problem of learning to read can be eliminated if in the beginning the teacher will allow the child to read in his own dialect; (2) teachers must free themselves from the mistaken idea that spelling determines pronunciation.

This brings us to some problems that bother teachers when the child dictates his stories. One of the questions most commonly asked by teachers is: Do we write the story in the exact language of the divergent speaker's dialect or in acceptable literary form? In view of what we have said about spelling, many of the errors will be corrected. If other errors remain in terms of what is considered "good" usuage in the community, I would say that only the grossest errors should be changed; for example, if the child says, "We pulling the wagon," the teacher might change the sentence to "We pulled the wagon." It is important that the sentence pattern of the original be maintained so that the child can easily read it back after it has been written for him. The relationship between the structural elements in reading material and those used by the child have been too well

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[5]This line of reasoning is more fully amplified by Goodman, loc. cit.

established to warrant further elaboration.[6] Suppose that the teacher reads back to the child the corrected story and the child insists that that was not the way he dictated the story, what does the teacher say? The teacher should tell the child that she knows that what she has recorded is not identical with what he said, but that she has made some changes in order to make it read more like a story book on the library table. Usually, this is sufficient explanation and has generally proved acceptable to the child.

Another situation may arise that distresses some teachers: despite the teacher's corrections, and even if she has read the story back to him, he still "reads" in his dialect as originally dictated. At that time, do nothing. However, this will tell the teacher that this child needs help in becoming accustomed to the dialects of written English. Meanwhile, the child is still having the satisfaction of being an author and for obvious reasons this feeling should not be destroyed, particularly if we are trying to build the self-image of the lower class child. Also, the lower class child may bring enough negative attitudes toward school and we want to build positive ones instead of reinforcing the feeling that he is rejected at school. When we reject the child's language, we are rejecting him. My recommendation is that if the teacher is concerned about the child's dialect, she should work on it with him at another time.

An additional problem may be that the divergent speaker does not seem to talk very much, even in his own dialect. This may seem to be true; however, in informal situations with his peers you will find that he is quite voluble. It may be that his culture has taught him to be quiet and stay out of trouble; furthermore, he may feel that the culture of the school is such that one is better off not talking. If we are sincere in wanting to help him enhance his self-image and learn the dialects

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[6]Ruth Strickland, "The Language of Elementary School Children: Its Relationship to the Language of Reading Textbooks and the Quality of Reading of Selected Children," BULLETIN OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, Indiana University, XXXIV, No. 4, July, 1962.

of the school, as teachers we must provide an atmosphere in our classrooms which makes him feel accepted and free to talk as best he can or the Language Experience approach will not work. When conditions of acceptance prevail, we can accomplish a great deal in helping the child become multi-dialectical and his speech will grow by leaps and bounds. Language development, including learning to read and write, is deeply integrated with the development of the whole child.[7] Furthermore, there must be freedom to make mistakes, for that is how language learning takes place.

Because the divergent speaker may be quite articulate in his own social milieu and his dialect is adequate for these needs, the teacher must still help him acquire the forms and structures of the school's dialects, because they are necessary for dealing with the intellectual tasks of school and for occupational success.

The fostering of concepts and vocabularies is basic to success in all of the language arts. Loban[8] has found that the children who possessed the largest vocabularies and the highest achievement in oral language surpassed other children in reading and writing (composition) ability as they progressed through the elementary grades: "I would urge that, in addition to many opportunities to hear and speak the "standard" dialect under a variety of circumstances, a short period of the school day be reserved for oral drill in usage. These periods should be kept separate, be brief and should provide the opportunity to acquire facility in the dialectical usuage of the school. By drill I do not mean filling in blanks,

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[7] Carl A. Lefevre, "Language and Self: Fulfillment or Trauma? A Summary," pp. 278-283, Improvement of Reading Through Classroom Practice, Proceedings of the International Reading Association, IX, 1964.

[8] Walter D. Loban, "Language Ability in the Middle Grades of the Elementary School," Cooperative Research Project No. 324, U.S. Office of Education, 1961, p. 136.

as few published exercises deal with the divergent speaker's usuage problems and it is an ineffective method of improving communication skills. Loban found that what teachers do to motivate language which requires elaboration and precision of thought in writing and speaking deserves more classroom time than attention to errors in usage.[9] The lower socio-economic child who is a divergent speaker suffers from what Deutsch[10] calls a "cumulative deficit phenomenon." This deficit becomes more marked in the child's cognitive and language development as he progresses through the school. The Language Experience Approach provides a means of counter-acting thid phenomenon.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the Language Experience Approach, let me start with my experiences in Hawaii. The teachers with whom I worked who employed the Language Experience Approach found that the children in kindergarted and first grade demonstrated greater ability to express ideas and to use a larger and more precise vocabulary than in previous classes. In summarizing the research on the language-experience approach up to 1963, Hildreth[11] concluded that by the end of grade 3, typical children taught systematically by this method, followed by the free use of reader units and library books were reading as well as or better than pupils taught from the beginning with only basal readers.

Harris[12] et.al., are conducting a study that has direct bearing on the use of

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9 Robert C. Pooley, TEACHING ENGLISH USAGE. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1946; Walter D. Loban, THE LANGUAGE OF ELEMENTARY CHILDREN. Research Report No. 1, Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963; as quoted in Helen K. MacKintosh (editorial chairman), CHILDREN AND ORAL LANGUAGE, A Joint Statement of the ACEI, ASCD, IRA, NCTE, 1964, pp. 16-17.

10 Martin Deutsch, Speech presented at the 1964 Annual Meeting of the American Orthopsychiatric Association, Chicago, Illinois.

11 Hildreth, loc. cit., pp. 293-294.

12 Albert J. Harris, Blanche L. Serwer and Lawrence Gold, "Comparing Reading Approaches in First Grade Teaching with Disadvantaged Children -- Extended into Second Grade." The Reading Teacher, VIII (May, 1967), 698-703.

this method with the type of child we have been discussing. Their final data are still being analyzed. In an interim report, thy state that the children in their study who were using the Language Experience Approach did as well in reading, spelling, and arithmetic at the end of second grade as those children using either the basal reader or Phonovisual methods. The only other area of the language arts on which systematic research has been conducted in the effectiveness of the Language-Experience Approach is a doctoral dissertation by Giles,[13] on the oral language development of first graders. He reports that the first graders in the language experience group were significantly superior to those in the basal reader on five of six variables for boys and four for girls.

In closing I should like to make some recommendations on the use of the Language Experience Approach with divergent speakers of the lower socio-economic group. First of all, we should use this approach with the child as early in his life as possible. Second, the development of speech, vocabulary and concepts must be a continuous process throughout the school years. Third, skills must be taught systematically; fourth, a wide variety of reading material must be always available in all areas of the curriculum; fifth, the program must have a strong undergirding of first-hand and audio-visual experiences. Sixth, asking evocative questions that cause thinking and the wide use of language rather than a yes - no answer. Seventh, and most important, let's employ the best teachers available for these children, for the teacher is the most important ingredient for success in children's learning.

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13 Douglas E. Giles. "The Effects of Two Approaches of Reading Instruction upon the Oral Development of First Grade Pupils." Dissertation Abstracts, XXVIIA (July, 1966), 139A.

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November, 1967